Tina Strong

Masters Project #1

Building Community Between Regular Education Staff and Special Education Staff

As a Visionary and Servant Leader the most significant things that I learned through this project is the importance and power in tackling an issue that most administrators want to sweep under the rug and ignore. The lack of communication and collaboration between all staff members, not just regular education staff and special education staff, has been a significant contributor to the low morale and disfunctionnality of the school for many years. Todd Whitaker (144) in his book *What Great Principals Do Differently* as one of the eighteen things that matter most “Before making any decisions or attempting to bring about change, great principals ask themselves one question: What will my best teachers think of this?” I believe that I considered this question when deciding to do this as a project. Through my years of experience and through many, many conversations with teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, and community members; all stated the lack of communication and collaboration amongst staff. Great teachers as well as mediocre teachers seem to all have at least one thing in common, students would benefit from staff working together and accepting differences as professionals and not an attack on one’s character. (*LEADERSHIP*-1 servant, moral, collaborative; 2 organization vision; 3 context for leadership; 4 public school history, philosophy; 5 change process; 6 integrity, ethics, fairness; 7 safe, effective environment; 8 discrimination, diversity; 9 effective communication)

My objective was and continues to be to build a stronger community between regular education staff and special education staff. As the staff begins to work together as a strong community the morale should also improve. This issue was addressed first by staff members completing a survey that asked some difficult questions, but questions that needed to be asked. The next step was sharing the results of the survey to the respective groups. This step was then followed by an activity that empowered the groups to work towards ways to increase collaboration and communication. By empowerment I mean that the respective groups developed their own ideas on how to approach the issues that were brought up in the surveys. Administration did not dictate a solution. The meeting was facilitated in a community setting where the groups held conversations regarding the comments on the surveys and then through these conversations several themes kept resurfacing and eventually became the possible solutions(s) to the issues. The focus of the meeting was always redirected to “we.” Taking ownership away from one singular statement(s) and changing it to “how can we make this better?” kept the flow of the meeting in a positive productive direction. (*DECISION MAKING*: 1 processes & theories; 2 role of power & influence; 3 consensus; 4 motivational theories; 5 long range strategic plans; 6 problem solving strategies; 7 fairness and ethics; 8 change process; 9 conflict resolution models)

Spady and Schwahn in *Learning Communities 2.0* define improvement as one of the principles of professionalism. Improvement is “a commitment to continuously enhance the quality of personal and organizational performance, the processes used to generate results, and the results themselves.” (36) As a future administrator and current teacher improvement is a value that I strongly believe in and I am constantly looking for ways to improve. For example, as a teacher I have been told “your kids do such a good job at writing, you are doing something right.” My response has always been, “but I am missing something, where can I improve?” I have never been willing to accept that compliment as a reason to stop looking for other ways to improve in an area, even if it is a miniscule improvement. I feel that there is always at least one student that is not responding to my teaching and I always ask myself “what can I do differently to reach that student?” As a future administrator I foresee that question to change slightly to “what can I do to be a better administrator? Am I doing all that I can to create a healthy working environment where student learning is first? Am I building community amongst staff? Am I building community between staff and the larger community?” (*SCHOOL LAW*: 1 right, responsibility of students, staff; 4 discrimination; 6 teacher liability;7 special education; 8 ethics and law)

My beliefs about education leadership remain the same since enrolling in Silver Lake’s College Administrative Leadership Program. I have always felt that collaboration and communication are the keys to a positive working environment that will put children’s learning first. However, where I have changed in my beliefs is how to “build a community” that puts communication and collaboration as a priority. As an early childhood teacher that was responsible for mainstreaming children into the regular education classroom I often had to make decisions that the regular education teacher did not like. However, my decisions always came after communication the need with the regular education teacher and listening to his/her concerns and suggestions. Sometimes my decisions would reflect what the teacher expressed and sometimes they would not. To avoid the anger or talking behind the back I would always end the conversation with “it is okay that we agree to disagree, we are both professionals and we both have different mindsets. But we have to put the needs of the student before our own personal needs.” Often this did stop some of the talking and sometimes it did not. I have heard other people use this phrase often in difficult decisions and I plan to continue to use the phrase as an administrator. It is important to clarify that this statement is more than “just a phrase” to me. I fully believe in its truth and it is a value that ought to be shared amongst all educators.

Spady and Schwahn in *Learning Communities 2.0* list six traits of professionalism. These traits describe professionals as people who are collegial, dedicated to practice, embrace a code of ethics, passionate, lifelong learners, and self-aware. Spady and Schwahn state that the leader, administrator is responsible for “creating, monitoring, and sustaining a collegial culture of professionalism.” (41) They also state “relational leaders know that culture is too important to leave to chance, so they don’t.” (42) This quote is supports why I chose communication and collaboration as my project. The culture in our district has been left to chance for far too many years and it shows. People in the community are aware of the issues in the district. Some community members have chosen to apply for open enrollment for their children because of the atmosphere in the district. (*PRINCIPALSHIP*: 1 role, history; 2 manager vs. leader; 3 role in community; 4 supervision, evaluation of personnel; 5 role in finances; 6 role in student discipline; 7 school reform; 8 communication & technology; 9 child development, learning)

I was given lead roles on the RTI (Response to Intervention) team and the PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention Strategies) team. While on these teams we have been developing intervention tiers, choosing members for the SAT (Student Assistance Team), a list of intervention tools, and protocol for moving students to the different tiers, and determining when a student should be referred for special education evaluation. The PBIS team is implementing a pilot group for a Tier II intervention called check in/check out (CICO). These decisions were based on the districts vision for student achievement, the district’s goals for special education and pupil services programs, best practices and educational research, SWISS data, teacher input, and the common core state standards. The team members on RTI and PBIS are collaborating with teachers and providing in-service for the new documentation and guidelines that are being developed for the intervention tiers.

My project did not bring about as much change as I would like to have seen. But the important thing is that it did bring about some change and it has increased collaboration with some staff members. Even though my practicum/project is completed this is an issue that I will continue to work on with the current Director of Special Education and Pupil Services and the other administrators. I feel strongly about the morale in the district and I am willing to step out on the limb to try and make some changes. I am also very aware that this could damage my future as an administrator in the district, but if I am going to continue to work in the district, even as “just a teacher,” I feel that is a chance that I am willing to take.

I have developed a “blue folder” for special education staff to monitor their interactions/conferences with the regular education teacher. The folder will contain a Special Education Teacher Checklist, a Regular Education Teacher Checklist, a Monthly Documentation of Consulting With Regular Education Teacher Document, and the PUSH IN (inclusion) Protocol letter. I have shared this idea with the Special Education Director and he said “I like it, but it is not something that we should implement this year. We should share it with staff at a staff meeting and look to implement it next year.” The blue folder developed because of the abundance of blue folders from a previous initiative. Therefore this is my continued goal for the remainder of this year and into next year. (*HUMAN RESOURCES*: 3 staff development programs; 4 supervision models; 5 motivation, needs; 6 staff evaluation models; 7 needs of diverse populations; 8 staff handbooks; 9 community support. *LEARNER CENTERED LEADERSHIP*: 1 school culture, climate; 2 curriculum development; 3 supervision, evaluation;4 using test data; 5 beginning teachers; 6 teacher standards; 7 celebrating accomplishments; 8 communicate vision, mission; 9 long range strategic plans. )

**Other Competencies Met:** *ADMINISTERING SUPERVISION SPECIAL ED* : 1 leadership and change; 2 organizational structures; 3 fed/state/local financing; 4 legal issues; 5 roles, responsibilities; 6 service delivery, challenges; 7 collaboration; advocates; 8 staffing, staff development; 9 evaluation, accountability. *SCHOOL LAW SPECIAL ED (Sped Law*): 1 history special needs, SPED law; 2 statutory law; 3 case law; 4 tort negligence; 5 state laws, codes, DPI statutes; 6 right to access, receive services; 7 procedural due process; mediation; 8 rights of students; 9 support services.

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